

Idries Shah

Destination Mecca



*‘As exciting as a good novel’
Times Literary Supplement*

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A Request	

Seek not our resting-place upon this earth:

But find it in the hearts of men.

Rumi

CHAPTER I

Gentleman at Large

OCTOBER IN LONDON. Away beyond the Club's terrace a handful of Embankment tramps crouched under the bare trees. I stood by the reassuring radiator and watched them, oddly contrasting with the inhabitants of my little world.

Was their life, huddled on a public bench, panning out as they wished it – as they had thought it would? Was mine, sprawling in a cosy smoking-room, any more productive? I was not sure that either thought mattered so very much, anyway.

Over in the corner some threadbare diehards of club life smoked and muttered over their leisurely pints. Suave, smooth waiters, smiling, hovering, well-groomed, gave our artificial community a superficial air of well-being that I knew from protracted observation to be purposelessly assumed. Every one of the obsequious servants had in reality more spare cash than the spending money that club life allowed many hard-pressed Members, up to their ears in debt. Clubland was doomed in a day when most people outside these walls thought that a club was a place where one danced until the early hours of the morning. 'Keeping up with the Joneses' was about all that was left. We were a survival from another time. At least our Embankment neighbours had perhaps come to terms with life. We had not.

What was I? A writer, a traveller – and an outlaw in a sense. It seemed funny how names, labels, associations of ideas – shadows without substance – could capture and influence men's minds, even today. Even today, when colourlessness was the rule.

A writer, say, is respectable. Even if he is almost antisocial, he can be called bohemian. He is a creative worker, or is supposed to be. That is enough. People must have labels. The scramble is to get the right one, and then to hold on to it...

Writers and travellers are knowledgeable men, people to be reckoned with. Thus runs the general impression. A refugee, on the other hand, is something not very nice. He does not fit into any pattern. A refugee writer? Nothing at all. The adjective, then, swallows the noun. Was one an exile, then, or an *émigré*?

I had left certain things behind in the East, and had in turn collected others in the West. Meantime, the tide of life and of events had passed on. Other times, other ways still clung to the mind: a trap for the unwary, like long ceremonial swords that look well but are a curse to wear.

Introspection can go too far, and you do not need me to tell you that. Little more than four years before I had had all I wanted in a material sense. What exile, though, does not say that he was once rich? This case parallels that of the modern reincarnationists, who seem able to identify

former celebrities reborn far more easily than humbler folk. I had to find myself, to come to some sort of terms with the world. If tramps could do so, surely I (a sort of wanderer too) could do the same? *Noblesse oblige* is a delicious fantasy: it does not fill the stomach or really quieten the conscience.

Out of a maze of fogged ideas, salient points began to emerge. I had written a good deal, mostly for my own enjoyment. Much of it, too, had been published; and I was now living on that former hobby in deadly earnest. I could not say that I was enjoying the experience, for I did not regard myself as a creative worker. I could not, that is, weave beauty (or anything else) out of mere words and sell them as literature. I would have to sell what I could, where I could, regardless of any budding talents, irrespective of anything but that cheque. Surprisingly, I seemed to have no grudge against life. My entire thoughts were turned towards action.

I had to get out of this environment, no doubt about that. Clubs and social life seemed to be for those who earned them, or who did not need to earn at all.

I went upstairs to my bedroom, high above the river.

On a chair was my suitcase, and I turned out its remaining contents. A world map, some stones picked up in South America because they seemed to be of interesting shapes and colours: and a camera – Robot f/2.8.

I unfolded the map on the floor, placed four stones on Asia and Africa, and made my plan.

I had been trying to get some newspaper interested in sponsoring me for a trek through unknown Arabia and Africa. If I ‘went and returned on my own resources’ they would ‘always be glad to see the material’. There are always, it seems, dozens of tiresome young men going about London trying to get people interested in things.

I looked at the stones and the places they marked: Mecca, stronghold of Islam, city forbidden to non-Muslims, goal of every Muslim pilgrim. To visit the Shrine here is the duty of all who follow the teachings of Muhammad. Sudan: land of the dreaded Mahdi, of the Twin Niles, ju-ju and the Mines of Solomon. Afghanistan: country of my grandsires, beyond whose southern border lay the unmapped mountain realm of the firebrand Fakir of Ipi, ruler of three million warrior Pathans. And Petra: a city hewn in prehistoric days from the rose-red living rock, rumoured cache of a treasure greater even than that of Solomon, son of David, Commander of the Jinn.

There were seven stones. The last three I placed on Syria and Lebanon and Cyprus, the home of Venus.

That was my way: travel, adventure, material for writings, some measure of oblivion and a taste of the East again, even for a year or so.

I rang up an old friend. ‘Thinking of going to Saudi Arabia? The King has invited you, of course? No? What are your plans, then? Oh, my dear fellow, you can’t just *walk*, you know! Best of luck anyway.’

I picked up Robot Two-point-Eight, weighed it in my hand. The day

before I had been told that there was a lift going on an ex-Naval surplus boat. 'Delivery Tangier, old boy, piece of cake. Care to come along?'

When I was planning my Eastern journey in England, and talking to kindred spirits about the idea of seeking out unusual places and writing about them, one thing seemed to be on everyone's lips.

'Old Tony? No, he isn't around any more. Made his pile in Tangier, they say.'

'George? Saw him down in Cornwall, tinkering about with boats. Funny thing, but he seems to have taken up yachting in a big way. Was fitting out three ex-Naval jobs there. I suppose he's got customers for them...' 'Freddie? Yes, I got a picture card from him postmarked Canaries, of all places. Said he was just cruising with a few friends...' 'Tommy? Don't you know? He got a year for smuggling cigarettes from Tangier to Spain. Used to take them to the Canaries, too, in a fast war-surplus sub-chaser or something. Rotten luck, don't you think?'

Pictures and material on smuggling from Tangier, that was an angle. I set about collecting information. Nobody wanted to talk much, but an old school-friend told me that since the war most of the brighter sparks had high-tailed it for the Mediterranean, where fortunes were to be made. 'Guns for the Jews and Arabs, old boy. Then refugees out of India and Pakistan. Then cigarettes and nylons into Europe from Tangier. Tangier is the place. Or Villefranche in France.'

But I could not get in touch with anyone who had actually been on the Cigarette Run across the Straits of Gibraltar. The nearest I got was slipping a fat tip to a barman in a small West End club, and being told to come back in a week. What I got in exchange was the only clue available, it seemed.

It was a now-tattered piece of paper, which is before me as I write. I have changed the names and jumbled all the details, of course.

'1. J__ M__. Claims to have had experience on a cigarette ship. "B" Class ML, and formerly war experience in the Indian Army. Present address unknown, but might be contacted through X Bank, Isle of Man.

'2. G__ S__, formerly of St. Paul's House, Woffingham, Devon. Now running Motor Yacht *Boysie*, c/o GPO, Tangier. Has made several trips across the Straits, and is now selling boats to cigarette interests. While awaiting offers for the boats (which he equips and sails out to Tangier), carries out smuggling charters across the Straits and possibly to the Canaries. A strange type of person.

'3. E__. Former shipmate of No. 2, but fell out with him. Is now somewhere in England, trying to raise capital to buy or charter a ship to use for cigarette work. Says he has not so far been able to get anyone to believe in the plan, or else they will not trust him with the £3,000-odd he needs, or maybe they have not got it. He mutinied against his Captain, once, in the Straits.

'4. D__ W__. Went specially to the Mediterranean to study the question. This is his home address (...). Nobody knows where he is now.

'5. J__ P__. He is a useful and ambitious man, and is trying to break

with No. 2, for whom he is a crewman. Keeps his eyes open and should make good soon. Present whereabouts: probably with No. 2 (above) in the Mediterranean. Suggest that you look for further information in Tangier.'

There was no reply from the various smugglers to whom I wrote as a result of this information. But somehow the word had got round that my knowledge of languages might be useful in the area...

'Delivery Tangier, old boy, piece of cake. Care to come along?'

Twenty-four hours later I was heading towards the Thames Estuary in *Jemima*, the seventy-foot ex-Naval craft that Aubrey was taking out to the smuggling field. Fate, I exulted, seemed to have taken a hand. I had not been forced to part with Robot Two-point-Eight – which I needed for photos. And I was on my way to the East.

Mecca, here I come, even if I have to walk all the way, once I get on Eastern soil...

CHAPTER II

Tangier: Smugglers' Paradise

AUBREY EXPLAINED THE situation in Morocco to me during those long days of lazing in the sun on the way out.

'Tangier is an international zone carved out of Morocco. It is administered by an international commission which is so neutral that it cuts its own throat at every turn. You can do many things legally which would get you sent right to jail anywhere else. And you can get round almost anything if you have the money. Hundreds of people have made their piles taking cigarettes, penicillin – even drugs – into Europe from Tangier.'

'But where do you get the supplies?'

'Cigarettes – I wouldn't touch anything else – are imported in the regular way from America. You can import them yourself, if you wish. Most people buy them from importers, though. These are held in bond for reshipment "somewhere else". Legally, you can arrive in a boat and buy all the cigarettes you like, and take them across into Spain. If you need faked papers, for any reason, Tangier is the place to get that done.'

'And then what?'

'Then you load them on to your ship, take them to Spain, the Canaries or even Italy, and flog them for what you can get. It is seldom less than 50 per cent profit, often over 100 per cent.'

'How do you make the arrangements as to where you will land the cargoes?'

'Well, you can either turn up with your boat and take the fags as freight for an "agent", or you can buy and sell on your own account. If you are freighting, all the arrangements are made for you. All you have to do is to be at some spot when instructed, with cargo, and you get your money, after you hand over the fags.'

Aubrey explained to me that it was difficult to set up on one's own without considerable capital. After the war a great many ex-Naval types had bought suitable fast boats cheaply, and gone out to Tangier with them to cash in on the boom there.

Then came difficulties. The Spaniards claimed jurisdiction over the sea for a greater distance than the normal three-mile limit. They arrested boats and captains, and this meant bribery to get them out. 'Nowadays you can insure in Tangier against seizure by the Spanish Customs.'

The smugglers' job was to load quickly at Tangier, make the rapid run to Spanish territory, and trans-ship into small fishing boats or else land the cargo somewhere where the buyer had sent trucks to pick it up. There were snags: pirates had been in action, and consignments had been hijacked. Again, in order to gain speed when pursued, cargoes had sometimes to be dumped. The Spaniards were using German torpedo

boats with fast Mercedes engines, and these could be a real danger.

The trade was believed to run into over £10,000,000 a year, and individual cargoes could produce a profit of between £7,000 and £15,000.

Aubrey himself was only going out 'on delivery'. This meant that he was working for a combine in Tangier which commissioned him to locate suitable boats in England, buy them, have them reconditioned for the job, and bring them out to them. For this he was paid a salary, commission and expenses: plus what he could pick up from the vendor in the boat-buying transaction itself. This way he was doing better than most: because there was simply no risk. What was to prevent a man dealing in boats?

'Trouble is, old boy,' he told me, a little sadly, 'expenses are high, and the number of suitable boats are few, because they have mostly been sold. The war has been over some time now. I'll be out with the suckers doing the actual runs soon, if I can't think of another angle.'

When we arrived at Tangier, the tiny port was teeming with craft. Aubrey was gleefully hailed by several rough, bearded types: 'Attaboy Strawberry, one more for the game,' or 'Reinforcements ahoy!'

We went ashore, to the offices of the smuggling syndicate. The streets were packed with gleaming American cars, gorgeously dressed women with a Beautiful Spy air, Moorish tribesmen, donkeys and pedlars. The population was so mixed that it just wasn't recognisable as anything definite any more.

Anyone can start a bank in Tangier – it is a free currency area. Banks are opening all the time – there were over eighty when I was there. *Nouveau-riche* opulence was everywhere: except where the local Moroccans were concerned. They seemed to have been rather adversely affected by this descent of international capital upon them. Arabs on the whole are the working population – getting paid the equivalent of about £1 per month – and those locals who have tried to copy the international spivs who are so firmly entrenched do not seem to have been particularly successful.

An exception to this rule, however, was to be found in the 'Managing Director of the Burnous Import-Export Corporation' – whom I shall call Akram el Burnous – our host and Aubrey's boss.

In the richly furnished offices of Messrs Burnous, the Chief entertained us to coffee, cultured conversation and a display of ready wit.

He was a small, fat man, of some sort of Arab extraction, who spoke a number of languages, and – as he told me – had his suits flown from Savile Row because he was too busy to go over there to be fitted. 'One day, perhaps, my friend, I shall be able to retire. Then...' His fingers flashed with diamonds, his round face glistened with holy joy. I would not be surprised if he were worth millions, in any currency you care to mention.

Burnous promised to get me on one of his ships as interpreter. He also warned me that if there was any 'incident due to your being

associated with us, it will be you that suffers, and that is definite'. Now we knew where we stood. Aubrey sounded Burnous on the question of whether he might be allowed to operate a boat if he bought one and came down to Tangier. The boss was in a good mood. 'Certainly, of course. I know that things are getting hard in England about the supply of boats. If you can get about three more, then you can come over here. I am trying to get new ones made. You know, these wartime craft are falling to pieces. New ones are very expensive, but the worst thing is the time for delivery. I cannot afford to wait six months. Really, boat-builders are tiresome....'

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ships' papers show your destination to be Samoa or anywhere you care to mention while they are being forged. It is usual, of course, to make the destination appear plausible, and on the return to have documents indicating correct delivery, just in case of enquiries.

Where the real snag comes in is the fact that informers paid by rival gangs, or the police of various countries, keep a very wary eye on cargoes. This means that from the moment the craft is loaded at Tangier the prevention authorities of at least three Mediterranean nations will probably have been alerted, and the boat may be challenged somewhere at sea.

If this snooping were inevitably successful, of course, nary a cargo could get through unintercepted. In actual fact during the autumn 'season' as many as twenty outfits may be regularly plying back and forth under cover of darkness.

How is this managed?

It was frequently alleged to me that the Spanish authorities could be 'squared'. Spurning that unsupported allegation as unworthy of a great Iberian nation, we arrive at the second and third possibilities. Either the Agent from whom one works can rebribe the spy or (which was the general procedure) the boat may be loaded at dead of night, far from any inhabited place. Real, old-fashioned freebooting stuff, this, and not one of the red-blooded men of the new Spanish Main would dream of thinking of himself as anything even faintly resembling a crook.

The Spanish Customs, as already noted, were said not to accept the three-mile limit. My skipper, in common with most of his contemporaries, thought this extremely unsporting. Several boats, he said, had been blown out of the water for failing to stop and account for themselves, when they were found cruising by night four or five miles from Spain. This generally happened when they were overloaded, and could thus not achieve the necessary evasive action. It was believed that those boats which carried reasonably light cargoes, with engines in good order, were never caught.

A 'Fairmile' type of craft can make enough speed to show a clean pair of heels to even *E*-boats, providing that she is light or can be unloaded double-quick. For this reason, cargoes were sometimes carried on deck, roped and tarpaulined, every man drilled in his split-second emergency role. 'It is no fun at the actual moment of crisis,' Aubrey told me, 'but there is something exquisite about the memory. Just try hurling overboard 850 cases of cigarettes in a matter of a couple of minutes and zigzagging frenziedly the while to escape the merciless Spanish searchlights, if you want to know what it is to be good and scared.'

On this particular night the Captain got away with it. Promptly at 3 a.m., a small Spanish fishing boat loomed out of the blackness. Signal lights blinked cautiously. All was well. This was not to be a 'run in' but a trans-shipment: far easier, though less well paid. Legally, according to our advice, we were completely covered, for we were operating outside the internationally agreed limit.

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to be met by fishing vessels outside the three-mile limit; and secondly, the independent yachtsmen who buy their own cargoes and make their own selling arrangements for delivery and selling. This report is mainly concerned with the former type of operation.

(2) Typical Operations

In a typical transaction, the procedure is generally as follows. The captain or owner of the boat arrives in Tangier. It is essential that he be known and trusted locally. He makes contact with the Combines, through one or other of their agents. A cargo is arranged by this agent. When the Agent has satisfied himself that the ship is of the kind which is used by his Combine (they have inexplicable caprices about this sort of thing, and have to make sure that certain kinds of engines are fitted, and so on), the cargo is ordered by the Agent, and delivered aboard the ship.

The cargo may be large or small. In the case of a new ship, Agents generally send only a few hundred cases, and also a representative on board, just to see how the thing is 'settling down' to work.

Everything is very highly organised. The ship sets sail under cover of darkness, on moonless nights, to make its rendezvous on the other side. The skipper has received half his freight charges in advance, and gets the balance on delivery, in cash.

He is paid in US\$6 or more per case, or a total of £2,000. Out of this, the crew of three are paid £20 a week on the average, and a bonus of over £10 for each cargo delivered. Fuel costs 1s. 4d. per gallon (diesel oil), and about 30 gallons are used in the crossing.

Frequency of Operations

It is possible to carry out three to four crossings per week. Delivery to the Canaries, Italy, etc., is paid for at a higher rate. It is possible to insure against mishaps, engine faults, or loss of cargo or boat.

Personnel

The present team proposing this operation consists of the following: one captain, with a two-year record of successful deliveries without mishap; and three assistants, one of whom is skilled in navigation, another in engines, and the third as general hand plus navigator. All personnel can double as deckhands and steersmen.

This team is referred to as The Group. They propose starting as soon as humanly possible, and to that end need a boat. They have all the experience and skills, but lack capital.

The Group proposes that an investor or a group of investors purchase a boat of suitable type, as their contribution, and register it as a yacht.

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endless line of infantry marching past, *enroute* to Indo-China, I thought of these men and their fate. It seemed odd that vice and crime had a greater fascination for many readers than history in the violent making in the Far East.

Somehow the time passed, and I could go on board the ship. In any case I was not here to study France, and even the period on board could be little more than a time for thinking out the problems of getting to Mecca, performing the Pilgrimage, getting pictures – and getting out.

As I arrived at the docks and opened my bags for the Customs official, he pointed dramatically at my dispatch-case. In it were nothing more than several packets of enlarging paper ('Do Not Open Except in the Dark'), and what he saw as a decidedly sinister-looking ampoule of developer.

Neither of these things would be opened, I was informed, if I would pay two hundred francs on each. The logic of it was beyond me, and I refused.

A porter was deputed by the exquisitely uniformed *Douanier* (who stood aloof while my feeble mind was grappling with the details) to explain, that, therefore, my hand-baggage would be exempted from search, as a favour.

'At the same time, *m'sieu*, in order to spare yourself needless delay in the opening of the *other* articles, it would be best to pay twenty-five francs each: that will be... two hundred francs.'

This beat me. I paid. The bags were chalked: a *douanier* is as good as his word. As the official disappeared towards the nearest bar, the porters, as one man, winked and smiled affectionately, lifting an imaginary glass.

After that I cursed my luck for not having some desperately dutiable contraband with me. It was just as well that I had not, for I was treated with offended aversion by the Egyptian Customs when I eventually arrived there.

I got aboard the ship easily enough: in fact, too easily – without passport or ticket, which I had laid down in the confusion of the douane shed. Now I found that all my attempts to go ashore again were met with the gravest suspicion by everyone I approached to prevail upon the gangway sailors to let me by.

The ships of this line may not have the best possible food aboard, but none can deny that the fittings are luxurious. As usual, the dazzling figure in braid and the neatest of uniforms is just a minor functionary – not the captain.

Literally hundreds of porters – all, so far as I could see, Arabs – were loading oil drums with block and tackle into our holds.

One, the 'Captain of Porters', now too old for active work, reclined on a pile of sacks by the quay, reverently placed there for him by a disciple. The Eastern patriarchy seemed strangely out of place. And yet was it? There was something so monotonously hypnotic about the rhythmic chant of the small, lithe men, so unendingly recurrent were the shapes of standard-sized drums, seen in all their shapes and

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Unbelievers', rather than the conquest of Persia, or India. This, to me, brought home again and again the reason why Islam has not lost its grip upon people in the way and to the extent that other religions have lost supporters: Islam has never set out to be a religion, in the same sense as these other creeds.

It was by recognising this fact that Jamaluddin El-Afghani became, in the nineteenth century, the Middle East's apostle of liberation and patriotism – while yet repudiating nationalism. Today almost every single party or group, from Morocco to Java, claims him as its inspiration, however different their aims. I shall speak of him and his work later, in dealing with his spiritual successors as I came across them. A very great deal of nonsense has been written about the so-called 'Panislamic Movement': much of it by orientalists who should know better. This is one fact which my journeys in Egypt and beyond amply proved.

Flags were flying, motor-boats sporting a thousand fluttering pennants cruised madly round the ship, as tens of thousands of paid and unpaid supporters of the Egyptian athletes welcomed their heroes at Alexandria harbour. Bow after bow they took, dressed especially in their tracksuits and sunglasses. Every minute the crowds thickened and became wilder; music mounted in frenzied tempo that I could not but feel – uncharitably, I suppose – must be maintained at that pitch only because the players were 'high' with hashish. Amid garlands and bouquets, through ranks of pashas three deep, and braving the batteries of cameras, the team stepped ashore, to be chaired to their waiting banquet.

It was morning, and the Cairo train did not leave for a few hours. We landed, to put off time before the departure of the desert express. The least said about Alexandria, perhaps, the better. The Khedive Muhammad Ali is reported to have said, 'Egypt is now a part of Europe.' It certainly did not seem at first sight to be a part of the East. The heat, of course, was there: so were the flies, and the usual drifting proletariat shabby in its pathetic imitations of Western garb, looking thoroughly dispirited, which it is, and should be. Too many indifferent orientals seemed to have been turned into bad replicas of Europeans. The typical long *galabiyah* or nightshirt which is considered standard fellahin dress is elegant in comparison with a pair of stained dungarees and a tenth-hand topee. These characters were most in evidence in the streets. Garish stalls sold at enormous prices things that one would throw away in England. Broad, sweeping avenues, built with a complete lack of taste, formed concrete jungles, where the heat battled with cement-dust for first place as indigenous pest.

Sadly, I drank an American soft drink in the baroque bar of the largest hotel, where befezzed men-about-town dangled their gold-topped canes and dusted patent-leather brogues (what taste) with silk handkerchiefs. A policeman, politely enough, saluted me and asked for a tip. I gave him five piastres – a shilling – and he seemed content.

There are some good beaches at Alexandria, where the capital's *élite*

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mind as to the real identity of the Emir than I had been before. Nobody that I knew had heard of a Kurdish chief of that name. From my window I had watched for the surveillance that apparently haunted Yakub, but it was not being extended to me, it seemed.

As I entered the lush foyer of the Mena House, a page asked my name, and he handed me a note: 'Please take Car Registration Number MSR 57854 from the hotel, and drive towards Pyramids. Ignition key in lock, Y.'

I had been working very hard writing up notes and developing films. With no fixed plans for my next point of travel, I was in a sufficiently fluid frame of mind to follow this thing to the end, even if it was a joke, a trap or the offer of a job. I was not even thinking deeply about the possible implications. Most people, I believe, at one time or another, find themselves in a frame of mind in which they are not disposed to think: what they want is action. So they go out anywhere, perhaps to a dance.

Situated as I was, I looked around for signs of possible interest, saw none, tipped the Nubian boy, went outside, had got into the Buick convertible with the number-plate which the Emir Yakub had left for me.

As I started it up, the thinking process seemed suddenly to switch on. What was going on? How did he know that I could drive? And I had no Egyptian driving licence. He may only want me to cat's-paw this car for him, so that his gang can steal it...

The Pyramids are no distance from Mena House, just outside Cairo. In about three minutes I saw the commanding figure of the Emir at the roadside, dressed in a Palm Beach suit, with a fez and walking stick, just in front of me.

'Salams, Emir, where are we going?'

'Forgive the inconvenience, I had some business to attend to... Go home, Anwar!'

A small boy, looking like any ordinary Egyptian peasant urchin, and cheekily grinning astride a small donkey, placed his hand on his heart in salutation, kicked the animal's sides, and trotted off. I had not even noticed him until that moment.

I thought I might be told a bit more than this.

'I am hungry, and we cannot eat pyramids, O Kurdish Emir.'

Yakub was all smiles now. I had not seen him like this at our first meeting. 'Come along, you Afghan wild-man, and see if you can sate yourself on what I've got for you.'

He got into the driver's seat, hared back to Cairo, and headed for Heliopolis. This was real cloak-and-dagger stuff.

Yakub offered me a cigarette from a gold case, flicked on the radio, indicated the lighter on the dashboard.

I decided to use a more subtle approach. 'Is there any way in which I can be of service to you? If you feel that, if I knew more - '

He cut me short. 'I am a friend of Abdullah Effendi, and he says that the melon seeds that you gave him have flourished in Damascus!'

Then I knew that I could trust him. Abdullah was a very old friend of our family. Emir Yakub had added the last phrase in the immemorial way of the East to identify friends from foes. It was a random watchword, a reference to something that was known between Abdullah and myself, a trivial thing, yet it proved that Abdullah had told Yakub somehow, to identify himself.

But I still did not know anything. Abdullah was a very old friend, a landowner in Syria, who spent most of his time, as far as I could remember, upon a book which he was said to have been writing for the past twenty years...

Yakub had checked up on me, and had contacted Abdullah, and obtained this code-word, all in a matter of twenty-eight hours! That much I did know...

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Pilgrims in Mecca: The Sayed Iqbal Ali Shah (centre) with his personal assistant and members of his family

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CHAPTER VI

Marching Orders

I WALKED FROM Azhar University, far away in the Old City, through the teeming, broiling streets of Cairo towards the capital's 'West End'. If words like melting-pot and kaleidoscope hummed through my brain, it was only because they fitted the scene better than anything else I could think of. Impressions crowded into the mind so fast that they seemed to blur one another until either the heat or the multiplicity of activities dazed me.

I had been in Cairo three months. I had a fair knowledge of the language: and I could understand, as a Muslim who had lived for years in the West, most of the things that were going on. But I could not get used to them going together like this. It was as if a giant ant-hill had been invaded by bits and pieces from another kind of life – and the ants were doing all they could to absorb this Western culture, with varying degrees of success.

From every café of the *Musky* twentieth-century loudspeakers blared passages from the seventh-century Qur'an. In one corner of the huge *suk* a tinsmith was hammering a Coca-Cola advertisement into rims for an ox-cart wheel. Outside the thousand-year-old Azhar University, with its air-conditioning and antique carpets, stood a long row of dollar-grinning American cars.

Even the people in the streets seemed a little thrown out of balance by the impact of Westernism, in spite of the fact that they had known it for centuries. This was shown to quite a remarkable extent by the assorted clothing of the populace. The standard turnout of the workers seemed to be a complete ex-British Army khaki drill uniform, with sandals and a skullcap. The Armenian, Greek and Coptic shopkeepers seemed to prefer to orientalise themselves, and to adopt Arabic names. The swarthy Sudanese from the deep south, complete with fantastic scarrings denoting tribal affiliation, were either immaculately robed in ultra-Arab style or else wearing the latest American-style clothes.

This was the East and West. In addition everywhere was to be seen the profound impact of the rediscovery of ancient Egypt. In spite of the Islamic strictness against Pharaonic ways, one saw names, pictures and even houses which were based upon the culture of ancient dynastic times.

As I emerged into the more modern part of the town, with its skyscrapers and neon signs, its donkey-carts and Cadillacs, its beggars and millionaire cotton men, a crowd watched a group of young men standing at a busy traffic intersection. A number of stunted, unhappy-looking policemen with staves edged forward apprehensively.

I stopped to listen to the shouting of the youths: '*Allaho-Akbar*,

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nosed and proud, he had that strange magnetism which I was to see again in his father, the warrior King ibn Saud, who had conquered the entire land of Arabia for the Wahabite dynasty. He looked surprisingly young: younger than he had seemed when I met him as a child, twenty years before.

On either side, respectfully silent, were the Ambassador in Cairo, the Ambassador from London, and other celebrities.

I kissed Faisal's hand. At this moment there was nearly a contretemps. I had forgotten that my camera was slung in its leather case under my armpit. As I bent forward it slipped and swung down, very much like a shoulder holster for something more dangerous. There was a distinct gasp from some of the company. But Faisal is a man of iron nerve. He merely smiled, and asked me how I was.

As I sat beside him, he asked me the reasons for my coming thus far, where I proposed to go afterwards, and questions of this kind.

I told him that I was a pilgrim, that I proposed to visit the Holy City, and that I would very much welcome the opportunity of presenting my respects to his distinguished father, who knew my own father.

He turned to the Saudi Ambassador in Cairo. 'The Sayed is our guest. You will be able to make all the arrangements, O Sheikh?'

The Ambassador bowed. I thanked the Emir, and withdrew.

I was on my way to Saudi Arabia. The following day I had my passport visaed and inscribed by the Saudi-Arabian Embassy: 'By Order of the Emir Faisal, Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Viceroy of the Hejaz...'

Hospitality among the Arabs is fabled for its magnificence. It was good to see that the Wahabis, stern puritans though they are, were true inheritors of that wonderful tradition.

I had only to book my passage.



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